

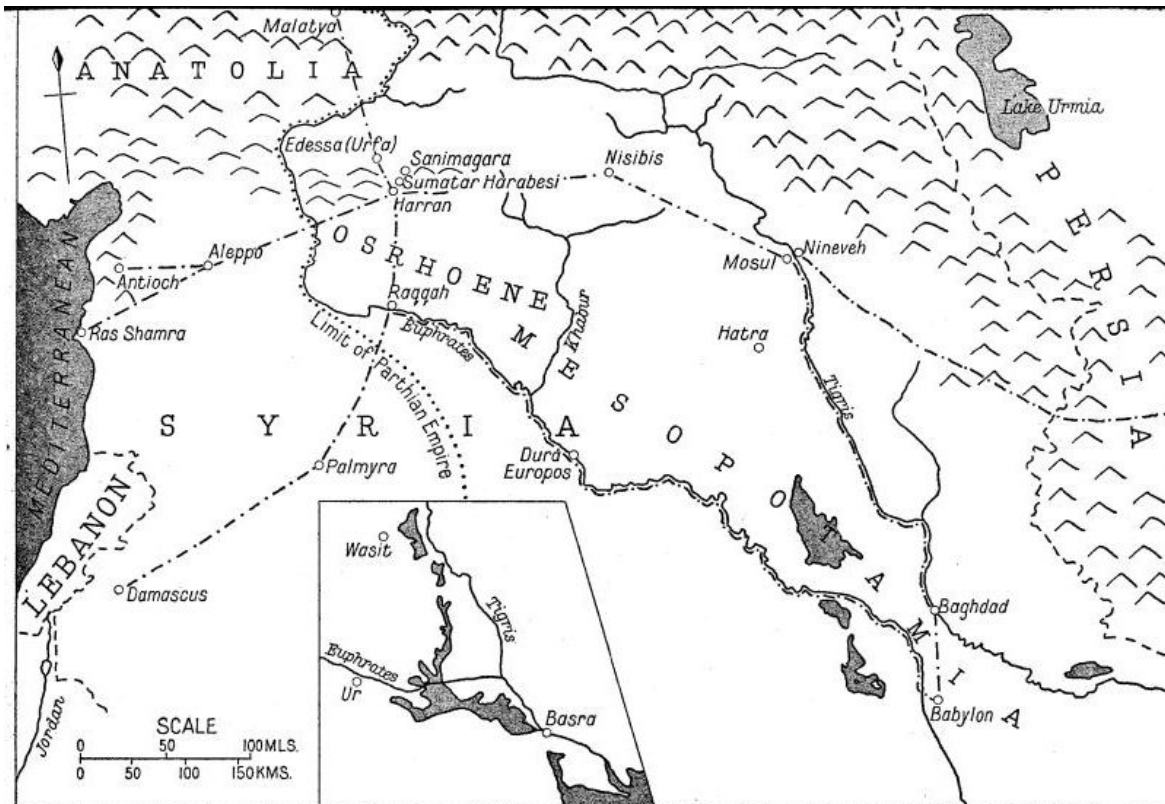
# The Sabian Mysteries

## The Planet Cult of Harran

by J. B. Segal

The material below, which is presented solely for non-commercial educational/research purposes, appears on pp. 202-220 of *Vanished Civilizations* (New York, 1963). The text begins on p. 211, with plates and illustrations preceding it. This online version has been amplified with links to Google Images. Also, some of the book's large plates have been replaced with smaller ones from Segal's later work, *Edessa, 'The Blessed City'* (Oxford, 1970), and moved to the end. See also: [Writings by J. B. Segal](#), at Internet Archive.

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Syria and Mesopotamia, showing trade routes passing through Harran

## B C

- c. 1850?** Abraham lives at Harran
- c. 1850** Temple of Sin at Harran mentioned in letter from Mari
- c. 1365** Sin and Shamash of Harran mentioned in treaty of Mitanni
- c. 850** Shalmaneser III restores temple of Sin at Harran
- c. 750** Sin of Harran mentioned in treaty of Arpad
- 675** Esarhaddon visits Harran on his way to Egypt
- c. 650** Assurbanipal installs his brother as High Priest at Harran
- 610** Harran sacked by Umman-Manda
- 553/2** Temple of Sin at Harran restored by Nabonidus
- 53** Crassus defeated by Parthians near Harran

## A D

- c. 100** Sect of Elkesaites active
- 165** Reliefs and inscriptions set up to Marilaha at Sumatar
- 2nd Cent.** Coin to Sin-Marilaha at Hatra
- c. 205** Abgar the Great adopts Christianity at Edessa
- 217** Emperor Caracalla assassinated on return from Harran
- 227/8** 'Orpheus' Mosaic made at Edessa
- 235/6** 'Phoenix' Mosaic made at Edessa
- 277/8** 'Funerary Couch' Mosaic made at Edessa
- 363** Emperor Julian visits Harran
- 5th Cent.** Abbess Aetheria visits Edessa on pilgrimage
- 549** King Chosroes refuses to take ransom from Harran

## A D

- c. 600** Koran mentions Sabians
- 639** Harran pagans surrender to Moslems
- c. 745** Caliph Marwan II makes Harran his capital
- 814/5** Governor of Harran allows pagans to perform rites in public
- 830/2** Caliph Ma'mun meets pagans at Harran
- 836** Thabit ibn Qurrah born at Harran
- c. 854** Al-Battani born in neighbourhood of Harran
- c. 880** Ahmed ibn al-Tayyib describes pagans of Harran
- c. 925** Ibrahim ibn Hilal born
- 943** Mas'udi visits Harran
- 1032** 'Round' Sabian temple destroyed at Harran
- 1184** Ibn Jubayr visits Harran
- 1260** Last Sabian temple at Harran destroyed by Mongols
- c. 1310** Al-Dimashqi writes on pagans of Harran
- 16th Cent.** First European contact with Mandaeans in S. Iraq

**Note on chronology.** The Sabians are such an elusive people, with so many tantalizing gaps in their history, that a full chronology is not possible. The list above tabulates their fleeting appearances in history and in contemporary writings.

The Sabians present an enigma as elusive as it is tantalizing. They are mentioned obscurely in the Koran. Thereafter we know that they were a religious community who performed strange rituals during the first centuries of Islam. Yet early historians—some of them men of integrity, but all of them opponents of Sabian beliefs and practices—were at a loss to identify them. The name of Sabian had, they darkly allege, been assumed by impostors. Later writers regard the name Sabian as a general title to designate the heathen and all that was hateful in heathendom.

Much of the information on the Sabians was assembled over a hundred years ago in a monumental work by a Russian scholar, Daniel Chwolson. Since Chwolson's book, little original material has appeared—some texts, some archaeological finds and sociological studies. Recent research, however, enables us to set out the problem afresh; whether it provides the answer to the enigma must be left for the reader to decide.

### **Ancient Harran and the Sin Temple**

Harran in North-west Mesopotamia is familiar to the Western world from the Bible. Abram and Sarai 'went forth. . . from Ur of the Chaldees.... and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there' (Gen. 11). It was to Harran that Abraham sent his servant to bring a bride for Isaac (Gen. 24), and it was to Harran that Jacob fled from Esau to dwell with the family of his mother (Gen. 29). At the time of the patriarchs Harran was already famous. It stood at the intersection of two major highways; one connected the mountainous regions of Anatolia with the populous cities of Syria and Palestine, another joined Asia Minor and the Mediterranean seaboard with the distant wealth of India and China. Harran was a great emporium. Ezekiel mentions it among the merchants of the East 'in choice wares.... in chests of rich apparel, bound with cords, and made of cedar' (Ezek. 27: 23f) .

But it was as a cult centre that Harran was specially renowned and particularly for the cult of Sin, the moon-god. Sin of Harran is invoked in treaties over a wide area between the 19th and 9th centuries BC. His emblems, the crescent and disc, have been found in North Syria as well as at Harran itself.

Many of the inhabitants of Harran had 'Sin' or 'Si' incorporated into their names. The Harranian temple of the moon-god and his family was known in Sumerian as E-hul-hul, the Temple of Rejoicing. It was restored by the Assyrian Shalmaneser III in the 9th century BC, and two centuries later it was restored again by Assurbanipal, who installed his younger brother as its High Priest. Esarhaddon on his way to Egypt paid his vows at this temple. It was roofed with cedar of Lebanon, its friezes were inlaid with lapis lazuli, and its doors were of silver.

A striking episode in the history of Harran—and a matter of significance to the present discussion—is the sojourn there of Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, recorded on stelae discovered at Harran and in its vicinity. Nabonidus, probably of Aramaean descent, had been directed in a dream to rebuild the temple of Sin, which had been destroyed by the Medes in 610. His mother, who died at the remarkable age of 104, was priestess there. But the people of Babylon refused to assist in the holy task; and for ten years the king abandoned his capital, until the temple was restored at Harran, to the glory of Sin, 'king of the gods' and 'greatest of the gods and goddesses'. On the stelae of Harran, king Nabonidus is depicted holding a sceptre bearing a divine symbol; he worships the emblems of the moon (a whole circle with a crescent below), the sun (a disk with an internal pattern of four points with spreading rays) and Ishtar/Venus (a seven-pointed star in a circle)



#### At the crossroads of two trade routes

in north-western Mesopotamia stands the ancient city of Harran. Here a caravan route from India and China to the Mediterranean crosses the highway from Anatolia to the cities of Syria and Palestine. Here too lived Abraham and Sarah, before they 'went forth to go into the land of Canaan', and it was at Harran that Jacob, after fleeing from Esau, tended the flocks of Laban. But it was as a cult centre that Harran was specially renowned—a centre of the worship of the moon-god Sin, 'greatest of the gods and goddesses'. This cult, with the worship of the sun and the planets, persisted after the rise of Christianity and even into the Islamic period. Its followers were known as Sabians. But who these Sabians were, where they came from and where they finally went—whether indeed they were entitled to the name of Sabians—is a mystery.



**The last king of Babylon**, Nabonidus, restored the temple of Sin in 552 BC. A stele commemorating this (above) shows the king holding a sceptre and worshipping the signs of the moon, the sun, and Venus. After the fall of Babylon the moon-god was still worshipped at Harran. A stele (left) bearing the crescent emblem of the moon-god Sin was found about four miles from Harran on the road to Edessa. This may correspond to the location of a temple of Sin that was visited by the Emperor Caracalla just before his death in AD 217. (1, 2)

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The stream of worshippers at the temples of Harran did not cease with the fall of the Babylonian kingdom. It was on his return from a visit to the temple of the moon at Harran that the Emperor Caracalla was assassinated in AD 217. The young Emperor Julian, who led a pagan reaction against Christendom, made Harran his headquarters for several days in 363; and it was from Harran that he set out to carve an empire in Persia. His defeat and death flung Harran into consternation and mourning. Nevertheless, Harran's pagans continued to resist the encroachments of the rising religion of Christianity. In the 5th or 6th century Harran was visited by a pilgrim abess from Spain [Aetheria

of Aquitania], and she records in her Latin diary: 'Except for a few clerics and holy monks, I found not a single Christian; all were pagans.'

When the King of Persia invaded this region in the 6th century he spared Harran as a bastion of the 'old faith'. And in 638-9 it was the pagans of Harran who took the initiative in the surrender of their city to the Moslem army.

### **The Beginning of the Problem**

It is against this background that we have the first historical record of the Sabians—two centuries later, in the year 830 or thereabouts. The Caliph Abdallah al-Ma'mun [813-833] passed by Harran to launch an attack on the territory of Byzantium. Our chronicler relates:

'People met him to wish him well. Among them were a group of Harranians. Their attire at that time was a frock-coat, and their hair was long and in locks, like the locks of Qurrah, grandfather of Sinan ibn Thabit.' Al-Ma'mun wondered at their attire, and he said to them: 'To which tolerated community do you belong?' They replied, 'We are Harranians.' He asked, 'Are you Christians?' They replied, 'No'. He asked, 'Then are you Jews?' They replied, 'No'. He asked, 'Then are you Zoroastrians?' They replied, 'No'. He asked, 'Then have you a (revealed) book or a prophet?' Then they became confused in their speech. He said to them, 'In that case you are pagans who worship idols; you are the men of the (talking) head of the days of (Harun) al-Rashid my father. Your blood (may be shed) with impunity; you are not a tolerated community.' They replied, 'But we pay the poll-tax.' He said to them, 'We accept the poll-tax only from non-Moslems who follow the religions which Allah (may he be exalted and magnified!) mentioned in his book and who have a (revealed) book. For this reason the Moslems made peace with them. But you belong neither to one group nor the other. Therefore you shall choose now one of two courses—adopt either the religion of Islam or one of the religions which Allah (may he be exalted!) mentioned in his book. If you do not, I shall slay you utterly. I grant you respite until I return from my present journey. If then you have entered into Islam or into one of the religions which Allah (may he be exalted and glorified and magnified!) mentioned in his book, (it will be well). But if you have not, I have given orders that you shall be slain and wholly extirpated!....'

So they changed their attire, and shaved off their locks and abandoned their frock-coats. Many of them became Christians and put on the girdles (prescribed for Christians), and a group of them accepted Islam. But a section of them remained as they were. These began to be perplexed and troubled, until a sheikh of Harran, a jurist, acceded to their enquiry. He said to them, 'I have a scheme whereby you will escape and be saved from slaughter.' They brought him a great sum of money from their treasury which they had renewed from the days of al-Rashid for this purpose. . . . (The jurist) said to them, 'When al-Ma'mun returns from his journey, say to him, 'We are Sabians', for this is the name of a religion whose name Allah (may he be magnified!) has mentioned in the Koran. Adopt it, and through it you will escape.'

Al-Ma'mun did not return to Harran. He died at Budendun in AD 833. 'But', continues our chronicler, 'from that time (the Harranians) adopted this name, because there had been no people [212] called Sabians at Harran and its regions (previously). When the report of al-Ma'mun's death reached them, most of the Harranians who had become Christians apostatized and returned to the religion of Harran. They let their locks grow as they had done before al-Ma'mun passed by Harran, on the grounds that they were Sabian. But the Moslems prevented them from wearing frock-coats, since this was part of the dress of those who were in authority. The Harranians who had accepted Islam were not able to apostatize for fear of being slain. They continued to dissemble within Islam. They used to marry Harranian women; they made their male children Moslem, their female children Harranian.'

The chronicler of this incident lived probably no more than sixty or eighty years after the events he describes, and he had first-hand acquaintance with the people of Harran. Yet we must hesitate to accept his account at its face-value. He was a Christian, and there was a long history of bitter strife between the pagans of Harran and the Christians. He has implicit reproach for the Moslems. The Moslem jurist who rescued the Harranians from their predicament did so, he claims, for a reward. Moreover, he insinuates, Moslems permit even heathens to shelter under the title of 'people of a (revealed) book' and to claim thereby the toleration of Islam.

It is incredible that pagans should have been allowed to continue their practices at Harran undisturbed—unless, for some reason, they were formally tolerated by Islam. Harran was not an obscure village remote from Moslem authority. It was an ancient city of great renown. It had played a prominent part in Moslem history before the time of al-Ma'mun. It was at Harran that Marwan II, last of the Umayyad Caliphs, had established his residence. Harun al-Rashid, al-Ma'mun's father, had visited the region of Edessa and Harran in about 792. He cannot have been ignorant of the religious background at Harran. Further, Syriac Christian chronicles—probably written at Edessa, but in any case no friends to the pagans of Harran—tell us that, about 20 years before al-Ma'mun's visit, the governor of Harran, Ibrahim, 'ordered the pagans of Harran to carry out these mysteries openly; and they were paying the tax'.

Can we believe that the Moslems were suddenly, shortly after al-Ma'mun's visit, hoodwinked into granting toleration to the Harranian pagans—merely because they had adopted the name 'Sabians'? Was this the first time they had applied the term to themselves? And what did it denote?

In the eyes of Moslems the earliest references to Sabians occur in the Koran. One passage declares: 'Surely those who believe, and those who Judaize, and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believeth in God, and the last day, and do that which is right, they shall have their reward with their Lord; (there shall come) no fear upon them, neither shall they be grieved.'

Clearly the Prophet Muhammad regarded Sabians as belonging to the general category of monotheists—Moslems, Jews and Christians—who believe in God and the day of judgment. Another reference in the Koran is less informative: 'God directeth whom he pleaseth. (As to) the true believers, and those who Judaize, and the Sabians, and the Christians, and the Magians, and the idolaters; verily God shall judge between them on the day of resurrection; for God is witness of all things.' From this we can deduce no more than that the Sabians were probably a recognized religious community.

There were, however, unknown to the Moslems, possible allusions in Christian writings to a sect of Sabians some four centuries before the coming of Islam. It is alleged that the prophet-founder of this sect, Elkesai, from the city of 'Serai' in Parthia, had been handed a book for men called Sobiai by an angel. Elkesai proclaimed forgiveness of sins for those who believed in this book and who received baptism, fully clothed, in a river or fountain in the name of the Great and Most High God and his son the Great King. The doctrines of the sect were a confused mixture of Jewish, Christian and pagan—the acknowledgment of a single God, the rejection of earlier prophets, the veneration of water as the source of life, belief in the male and female principle of Christ and the Holy Spirit and belief in reincarnation—Jesus was reincarnated in Elkesai. Epiphanius connects the sect with the baptizing sects beside the Jordan at the beginning of the Christian era; by some scholars they have been identified with the Mandaeans, or Subba, who claim to have migrated from that region (and whom we shall discuss later). It is improbable that they are the Sabians of the Koran, since their membership can never have been great and they lived remote from the milieu in which Muhammad moved. But we should also take into account the allegation that their leader derived from 'Serai' in Parthia. Parthia comprises also the area of Harran and Edessa; and the name Serai (from the Chinese term for silk) may allude to the silk trade which brought much prosperity to the inhabitants of those cities at the period to which Elkesai is ascribed.

We must touch briefly on the derivation of the name Sabians. They are not, of course, the Sabaeans of Arabia, nor are they to be connected with the Queen of Sheba whose visit to King Solomon is recorded in the Bible. The name was probably not Arabic but Syriac, the language spoken at Harran and Edessa, the language apparently of the Elkesaites and also of the Mandaeans, or Subba. The theory has been propounded that the name Sabians denotes the Baptizers, a term which might aptly describe both Elkesaites and Mandaeans. But would the Harranians have adopted for themselves the name of Baptizers, since baptism had a minor role in their religion—a religion to which they remained faithful for centuries? We may doubt this. It is possible, on the other hand, to interpret the term Sabian as 'Conventicler' or 'Congregationalist'. Finally, the name may be connected with Soba, a geographical term applied, at this period, to the city of Nisibis. Nisibis was a centre of Syriac culture. To Muhammad, then, the Sabians might be speakers of Syriac from the area of North Mesopotamia. They believed in a single God, and in the Day of Judgment; they are likely to have had affinities with Jews and Christians. They were, we may presume, people of a superior cultural level. Let us now look at the environs of Harran in the first three centuries of the Christian era—the period, that is, at which Elkesai and the mysterious Sobiai were apparently active.

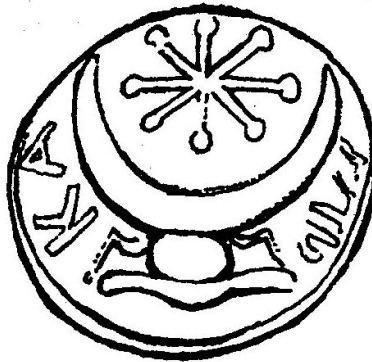




*Abgar the Great, the first Christian King of Edessa: portrait on a coin of the late 2nd century AD. (1)*

### **A Disordered Pantheon—Sin, Marilaha and Be'el Shamin**

Forty kilometres north of Harran stands the city of Urhay, now the Turkish Urfa. Under its Seleucid name of Edessa it won fame in Christendom [[pl 10](#)] as the first kingdom to adopt Christianity as its state religion—probably under Abgar the Great in the early 3rd century [figure 1]. According to the legend, its king corresponded with Jesus himself, and Syriac chronicles tell how the apostle Addai addressed the people of the city, probably on the Citadel mount now crowned by two Corinthian columns. The story is, of course, apocryphal, but it was widely believed [[pl 3](#)], and pilgrims came to Edessa from distant parts of the Christian world. But the native religion of the people of Edessa was the cult of the seven planets—the Moon, the Sun, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Saturn and Mars. One of the city gates was called after the temple of the Sun, Beth-Shemesh. The symbol of the crescent moon appeared on the coins of the pre-Christian kings of Edessa. Names of planets were incorporated in the names of its citizens [figure 2]. Bardaisan, the philosopher of Edessa and contemporary of Abgar the Great, wrote [213],



A coin from Harran of the time of the Emperror Caracalla, showing the crescent symbol of the moon. Caracalla was assassinated returning from a visit to the temple of Sin [figure 2]

we are told, a treatise on the conjunction of the planets. The planet cult at Edessa survived for several centuries after the introduction of Christianity, and even after the coming of Islam.

Light has been shed on this planet cult by recent work at Sumatar Harabesi in the Tektek mountains, a remote and deserted watering-place for the herds and flocks of the region, and about 50 kilometres south-east of Urfa (Edessa) and 30 kilometres north-east of Harran.

At Sumatar, a group of seven or eight ruined stone buildings, probably tombs, stands in a half-circle at irregular intervals around a central mount. They are of various shapes—one is round, another square, a third round on a square base [[plates 12-15](#)]. Due north of the central mount, and at some distance, are more imposing ruins, perhaps administrative buildings, including what is today called the 'castle'. Beside one is the headless stone statue of a man, dressed in a long outer garment reaching below the knees—we are reminded of the frock-coats of the pagans whom

al-Ma'mun encountered at Harran; below this garment appear trouser-legs. On the northern flank of the central mount—clearly a sacred site—is a relief which illustrates another garment of this period. The coat is somewhat shorter, and no trouser-legs are visible. Beside it is another relief, this time the bust of a male personage, and without a head-dress; his hair is secured by headbands, a bow and a half-loop on either side of his head. We are reminded of the Harranians of al-Ma'mun, who wondered at their long locks.

Beside these reliefs are two short Syriac inscriptions dedicated to 'the deity'. A third inscription declares that the relief which it accompanies was dedicated to Sin. A fourth inscription is largely indecipherable. But it appears to mention again Sin, the moon-god, and the dedication of a treasure; perhaps the treasure was in his care. Here we may recall the payment from the treasure of the Harranians to the Moslem jurist following their encounter with al-Ma'mun.

The summit of the central mount is a bare rock. A number of Syriac inscriptions are incised deep in the surface. One states: 'May Absamya son of Adona the *nuhadra* be remembered. May he be remembered before Marilaha....'

Two other inscriptions are dedicatory and are given pride of place, one on the western, the other on the eastern side of the summit. The first reads:

'On the New Moon of Shebat (February) in the year 476 (AD 165) I Tiridates son of Adona ruler of the Arabs built this altar and set a pillar to Marilaha for the life of my lord the king and his sons and for the life of Adona my father....'

The second records an event in the same month:

'In Shebat in the year 476. ... we set this pillar on this blessed mount and erected the stool for him whom my ruler nourishes (or, whose shepherd is my ruler). He shall be *Budar* after Tiridates the ruler. And he shall give the stool to him whom he nourishes (or, whose shepherd he is). His recompense shall be from Marilaha. And if he withholds the stool, then the pillar will be ruined. He is the god who knows us (?).'

The last words are uncertain. It is possible, but not probable, that they should be rendered, 'He is the god Sin'. The year in which these inscriptions were recorded, AD 165, was a turning-point in the history of Osrhoene, the province in which Edessa and Harran are situated. Roman armies occupied Edessa and expelled its pro-Parthian monarch Wael. 'The king' of the Sumatar inscription is probably the king of Edessa, the principal city of the province. There was a direct political bond between Sumatar and Edessa at this time. There was also, it seems, a religious bond between the two places. The chief deity of Sumatar was evidently referred to as Marilaha, 'the Lord God'. His cult emblems were a sacred pillar and a stool. The motif of the sacred horned or crescent pillar is a not uncommon lunar symbol in this region. We have the motif on reliefs in a rock-cut vault at Sumatar; we find it on the ancient stelae of Harran; and, for example, on the coins of Harran in the reign of Septimius Severus [figure 3]. But the more complex theme of a sacred pillar and a stool is depicted on two coins of Wael, the king of Edessa whom we have mentioned. Another Edessan coin of the reign of Elagabalus, some fifty years later, carries the same motif in miniature. The Wael coins, however, bear also a legend,

*The sacred pillar and stool on a coin of Edessa. These were the symbols of the god Marilaha. (3)*



unfortunately unclear, in the script of the Sumatar inscription. It may be deciphered as the name Marilaha.

Who was this deity Marilaha? In Nabataean, Mara ('lord') is one of the epithets of the god Be'el Shamin, 'master of the heavens'. At Palmyra, too, in the first centuries of the Christian era Mara, 'lord', is a title of Be'el Shamin, here the central member of a triad of deities; he is called variously 'lord of all', 'lord of the universe', 'great god'. In the 2nd-3rd centuries AD a small Aramaean kingdom was established at Hatra, about 80 kilometres south of Mosul. Inscriptions from Hatra—in a script akin to the scripts of Syriac and of both the Nabataeans and Palmyrenes—



indicate that there, also, the god that was invoked most frequently was Be'el Shamin; he is called 'great god', 'king'. And we find on coins from Hatra, the legend 'Sin Marilaha' [figure 4]. Was Sin here elevated to a supreme role, or was he identified with a central deity, Be'el Shamin?



*Coin of Hatra, a small Aramaean kingdom south of Mosul. The inscription on the obverse (left), in a script akin to Syriac, invokes the god Sin Marilaha. (4)*

It is not profitable to speculate on the identity of this central godhead. Cults appeared, merged and disappeared, and we cannot seek to resolve the disorder into a tidy pantheon in which each deity is allotted his particular sphere with peculiar attributes and peculiar duties. It is sufficient to observe that the general atmosphere over a large area of North Mesopotamia and Syria during the first centuries of the Christian era favoured the conception of a central deity attended by lesser deities. At some places—notably Beth Hur—Be'el Shamin was worshipped as 'chief of the gods' as late as the 5th century; at Harran the practice continued considerably longer.

### Edessa and its Mosaics

Before, however, we turn to consider Harran, we must study more closely certain religious practices of pagan Edessa. Evidence of the ancient worship of Tar'atha or Atargatis, that is, Venus, the goddess of fertility, is to be found in the pools of teeming fish which have survived to the present time. [pl 5] The pilgrim abbess who visited the city in the 5th or 6th century described them as 'shining and succulent'; and so they are today. To this day these fish are never eaten. Another sign of the Tar'atha cult is perhaps to be found in the leaf carried in the right hand of the central figure of the 'Family Portrait' Mosaic of Edessa [pl 7]; the mosaic, found in 1952, [214] is undated, but certainly belongs to the 2nd or 3rd century AD. The same motif is to be seen in the 'Tripod' Mosaic, found in 1956 [pl 4] and also undated; here the leaf is applied to a censer. A leaf is shown also in sculptures from Hatra.

The pagans of Edessa believed in a future life. The elegiac inscription at the foot of the 'Tripod' Mosaic ends with the words, 'May he have a goodly latter-end'. Resurrection is the theme of the 'Phoenix' Mosaic, found in 1956 and dated AD 235-6 [pl 17]. It depicts the tomb in the form of the conventional arcosolium of the Edessa rock-caves; above the tomb stands a wreathed pillar—we recall the sacred pillar of Sumatar—and the whole is surmounted by the Phoenix, the symbol of rebirth.

Reliefs in three cave tombs at Edessa show a funerary theme familiar from the sculptures of Palmyra [plates 9 and 11]. The dead man reclines, one elbow resting on a cushion [figure 5]. This is also the theme of the 'Funerary Couch' Mosaic, also found in 1956 and dated AD 277-8. Here the dead man holds a stoup of wine in his left hand. Around him are his wife and children; one holds a napkin, another a spice-box (?) [pl 8]. Other accessories in the funeral of an Edessan pagan are portrayed in the 'Tripod' Mosaic [pl 4]. The central object, mounted on a tripod, is for burning incense. A woman proffers what may be identified as a flower; a man holds a cap—possibly a cap of state.

The theme of another Edessa mosaic, the 'Orpheus' Mosaic, found in 1956 and dated AD 227-8, is one which will recur in our analysis of the religion of Harran [pl 18]. The bard is depicted sitting, his lyre in his hand; around him are a lion, a goat and birds in attitudes of becoming docility. We should not be surprised to encounter Orpheus at Edessa, for throughout its history its citizens loved dancing, song and poetry. Moreover, in the 3rd century, the Orpheus theme had acquired a considerable following in Rome's eastern provinces. A variation of the Orpheus motif may be found in the presentation of David in the Synagogue at Dura Europos [figure 6]. More significant, the biography of the Roman Emperor Alexander Severus, a Syrian by origin, informs us that the busts of Abraham, Jesus, the philosopher Apollonius of Tyana, and Orpheus stood together in his private chapel. Alexander Severus was acclaimed Emperor in 222, five years before this mosaic was made at Edessa; he passed through the region of Edessa in 231 on his way to the East.

The broad synthesis of cults and beliefs of which Alexander Severus was a proponent is amply reflected in the liberal philosophy of the school of Bardaisan the Edessan, to whom we have already referred. Born pagan, he adopted Christianity and wrote against heretics; later, however, he encountered the violent opposition of churchmen for what they regarded as his gnostic views. A century after his death St Ephraim attacked Bardaisan without mincing words: 'Let us pray for Bardaisan, who departed (this life) in heathenism—a legion of demons in his heart, and our Lord on his lips.' Further evidence of gnostic beliefs at Edessa is provided by the remarkable, if obscure, stone epitaph found there some fifty years ago:

'Pleasant is the resting-place of Shalman son of Kawkab (Star). They have answered thee and called thee, and thou hast answered them whom thou hast touched. Thou hast seen the height and the depth, the distant and the near, the hidden and the evident. And they—they know well the usefulness of thy reckonings....'

Now, we have seen that the pagans of North Mesopotamia were devotees of the planets during the first centuries of the Christian era. There was among them also an evident trend towards the conception of a single godhead—whether he stood alone above all other deities, or whether he was merely *primus inter pares*. At Edessa, as we have already observed from the monuments, the pagans believed in a future life. All the inhabitants of this area were speakers of Syriac. If, then, the interpretation of Sabians as the people of Soba—hence, speakers of Syriac—is accepted, there is justification for regarding the Sabians of the Koran as the pagan Semites of North Mesopotamia.

The identification may be applied with particular force to the inhabitants of Harran. They were for the most part Semites—more exactly, Aramaeans—and worshippers of the planets. Further, the inscriptions of Nabonidus elevate Sin above all other gods. He, is 'king of the gods of heaven and earth' and 'greatest of the gods and goddesses'. That this universalistic conception is no accident is proved by the inscription of Nabonidus at Ur; there Sin is described as 'lord of the gods of heaven and earth, king of the gods, god of the gods'. There is another reason for maintaining the view that the pagans of Harran were exponents of universalistic beliefs. The Koran uses the term *hanif* of a person who professed monotheism before the appearance of Judaism and Christianity—before, that is, Moses and Jesus; in the opinion of Muhammad the true *hanif* was Abraham. Now, Harran at the time of Muhammad had long been the centre of the Syriac *hanpe* (*hanpa* or *hanif*)—and Harran was the home of Abraham. *Hanif* is, in some measure, a synonym of Sabian; the latter is a member of this religious community, the former professed the beliefs of the community.

We shall discover later in this study that the Harranians possessed a sacred book—called, significantly, the book of the *hanpe* or Haniphites—and that they recognized certain prophets. True, the book was concerned solely, it appears, with ritual and not with ethics or law, and the prophets were legendary rather than human. But the Harranians satisfied the conditions required by Islam for recognition as a tolerated community. Why, then, it may be asked, did they falter and grow confused when the Caliph al-Ma'mun asked for their credentials? Several reasons may be advanced. Twenty years before the Caliph's visit, the rites of the Harranians had received the formal approval of the Governor of Harran. The sudden disapproval of al-Ma'mun must have found them off their guard and bewildered. Moreover, the Harranian pagans spoke Syriac and may well have been ignorant of the speech of the Caliph. This supposition is supported by their recourse to a Moslem jurist. But the most likely explanation for the confusion of the Harranians in their encounter with al-Ma'mun is their unwillingness to expose their book, with its description of the holy mysteries, to the eyes of an outsider.

### **The Sabians through Moslem Eyes**

From the 10th century onwards antiquarians, mainly Moslem, interested themselves in the beliefs and customs of the Sabians. Not all of them accepted the equation of Sabians with the pagans of Harran—we shall return to this problem later. The world of paganism had shrunk; vast regions to which Christianity had not reached had been converted to monotheism through Islam. Moslem writers swept into the ragbag which they labelled Sabian all the miscellaneous fragments they could find—from ancient Greece and ancient Egypt to contemporary India and China. It was not easy for the Sabians to counter these insinuations. Like every religious minority in the Islamic empire they were engaged in a constant struggle to maintain their very existence as a community. The creed of the Sabians was not one that could acquire general acceptance, and they seem to have made no effort to win converts. Their cult revolved largely around their mysteries; even their language, Syriac, was a 'secret' language to most of their Moslem neighbours. The descriptions of the Sabian religion by Sabians have not been preserved. The accounts that have survived show us the Sabians through the eyes of their detractors, Moslem, Christian or Jewish, who were

inclined to accentuate those details of Sabian practice calculated to arouse the hostility and repugnance of their readers. They contain allegations that are clearly preposterous but this will not surprise us. After all, allegations that ritual murder is practised by the Jews, a minority more accessible than were the Sabians, have been a recurrent theme in Asia and Europe even in the 20th century.

A brief account of Sabian beliefs is given by a 9th-century writer, Ahmed ibn al-Tayyib. The Sabians, he maintains, held that a supreme power, single and eternal, was the primal cause of the Universe. He is beyond the worship of men; and he has delegated the administration of the Universe to the planets who proclaim his supremacy. Furthermore, he has sent prophets—the most famous of whom are Arani (others omit this name), Agathodaemon (whom other writers equate with Seth and Orpheus—represented, it will be recalled, in a mosaic at Edessa) and Hermes (whom other writers equate with Idris or Enoch) to guide mankind. Sabian views on the nature of the deity, on natural phenomena, on the soul and dreams followed the views propounded by Aristotle. A contemporary of Ahmed ibn al-Tayyib tells us that the planets are deities, some male and others female, some benevolent, others malevolent, with passions and lusts like human beings.

Ahmed states firmly that the Sabians were united in their doctrines and free from sectarian feuds. But another writer of the same century tells—with greater probability—of two dissident groups. One group, the Rufusiyyah, wore no jewellery and held solemn sacrifice of swine; members of the other group never went out of their homes and shaved their heads closely.

These alleged Sabian sects are unlikely to be the pagans of Harran. The mosaics of Edessa depict jewellery prominently on the women's costume, the pig was a forbidden animal, the Harranians wear their hair long. A later source, Mas'udi, an acute observer who himself visited Harran in the 10th century, uses the term Sabian for pagans over an ever-broadening area. He writes, it is true, of the Sabians of Harran and those Sabians whom he describes as *Kimariyyun*. The former, he declares, are Greek and follow eclectic forms of philosophy; the latter are clearly the Mandaean or Subba (whom we shall describe later), since they live near Basra and Wasit. Mas'udi, it must be admitted, contradicts himself. In one passage he maintains that the founder of both groups of Sabians was Budhasaf (Buddha), believed—as we are told elsewhere—to have come from India. In another he writes of four categories of Sabians, the Chaldaean who are the Mandaeans, the Chinese who follow Budhasaf, the Greeks and Romans, and the Egyptians who survive at Harran! Later writers advance theories that are even more improbable. The more distant our 'authorities' in time and space from the Sabians—however we identify them—the more reckless is their definition of Sabian doctrines.

Nevertheless, we can arrive at a plausible outline of these doctrines. Sabians directed their prayers, as we have already seen, to the spiritual beings which (they held) act as intermediaries between men and the Supreme deity; these beings inhabit and guide, the planets, which stand to them in the relation of the body to the spirit. The activity of these spiritual beings produces movement in space, and this creates material things—plants and animals and men. But matter is bad by nature, and human beings have prejudices and passions; only through the influence of the spiritual beings are they endowed with love and amity, knowledge and healing. The Sabians therefore rejected the Moslem—al-Shahrastani calls it Haniphite—teaching that a human prophet can mediate between man and the supreme deity. They did not believe in resurrection in the conventional sense; every 36,425 years, they maintained, a new order of men, animals and plants is created afresh.

## **The Daily Ritual**

The ordinary Sabian could not conduct his life by general principles of elevated philosophy such as these. The mass of Harranians followed a complex scheme of ritual, worshipping idols in the temples as representations of the remote and often invisible planets. There were temples, however, not only to the seven planets, but also to the Primal Cause, the First Intellect, World Order, Necessity and the Soul. All these temples were round. The temples to the planets were each, our sources declare, of a special shape—we are reminded of the buildings at Sumatar Harabesi—and each reflected the ideas of those times about the colour and metal peculiar to each planet and the day of the week which it was supposed to govern. The arrangement and order of the temples and the height of the idols conformed to the distance of each planet from the earth. The temple of Saturn was hexagonal and black, his statue was of lead, his day Saturday; the temple of Jupiter was triangular and green, his statue of tin, his day Thursday; the temple of Mars was oblong (or square?), his colour red, his statue of iron, his day Tuesday; the temple of the sun was square, his statue was of gold, his day Sunday; the temple of Venus was probably a triangle inside a rectangle

and it was blue, her statue was of copper, and her day Friday; the temple of Mercury was probably a triangle in an oblong, it had no allotted colour, Mercury's statue was of clay and his day Wednesday; the temple of the Moon was probably octagonal, her statue—the moon was now regarded as female—of silver, and her day Monday.

We do not know where these temples were located inside Harran—except for a temple of the Moon which will be mentioned later. Outside Harran were two villages called Tar'uz [216], the gate of Venus, and Salamsin, the idol of Sin, which were celebrated in the 9th and 10th centuries for the devoutness of their Sabian inhabitants. The latter name recalls the present-day village of Sanimagara, east of Sumatar in the Tektek mountains, where may still be seen an altar and a large complex of ruined buildings. Here may have been the site of the temple of the Moon which was called Kadi [plate 16]. Legend, obviously apocryphal, related that the idol of the waters (Arabic *sanam al-ma'*) had fled to India, but upon entreaty had consented to return only 'thus' (Syriac *kadi*), 'so far'. This temple was the scene of important celebrations, both monthly and annual. Other Sabian ceremonies were held annually at a temple of Sin named *Sini* (or Sibti?).

In prayer the Harranians looked towards the North (less probably, with other writers, the South). They prayed each day at sunrise, noon and sunset; there were also supererogatory prayers. They washed before prayer.

The regulations concerning special prayers were stringent. Worshippers were instructed:

'If you wish to address a prayer to a planet and to make some request, first fill all your being with the fear of God the Most High, cleanse your heart of evil thoughts and your garments of uncleanness, and make your soul sincere and pure. Consider to which of the seven planets you should make your request and to which it conforms in character. Then put on your garments and address your prayer to that star when it has arrived at the place in the sphere which I shall indicate. If you do this, your request will be granted and you will receive the boon you desire.'

Each of the planets had influence over a special category of persons—Saturn over persons of authority, Jupiter over wise men and philosophers, Mars over men of violence, the Sun over persons of distinction, Venus over women, children and artists, Mercury over men of learning and science, the moon over cultivators and vagrants. Each planet, too, had its own temperament; Saturn and Mars, in particular, were malevolent. The right time for prayer was fixed by observation of the station of the planet in the sky. The suppliant, dressed in the colour and style appropriate to the planet—in praying to Jupiter, it should be noted, the suppliant wore the 'volume of the Haniphites' around his neck—offered incense according to prescribed formulae. The incense of Saturn contained opium and the skull of a black cat, and that of Mars contained human blood; the incense to the sun and moon is called respectively the 'greater' and the 'lesser incense of the Haniphites'. We have an account of the prayers to each planet, the name of its special angel, its magic appellation, and its chosen victim for sacrifice—Saturn demanded a black he-goat, Jupiter a white lamb, Mars a striped cat, the Sun a crested cock, Venus a white pigeon, Mercury a white cock, the moon a small calf.

The Harranian calendar was lunisolar; as elsewhere in the ancient Near East a series of twelve lunations was adjusted to the tropic year by the intercalation of an additional month every two or three years. Only two month-names peculiar to Harran have survived. One, the 'Date-month', is the name of the spring month which opened the year; the other, the 'month of the Chief of praise', corresponds to our January, and probably followed the election of the chief of the community.

The spring month was ushered in by a thirty-day fast which ended on the eighth day of that month. The full moon of the spring month was celebrated by a mystery. So, too, the full moon of the month nearest the autumn equinox was marked by solemn offerings of food and wine and sacrifices to the dead. At the full moon nearest the summer solstice women bewailed Tammuz, the young vegetation-deity whose bones, according to the myth, had been ground by the millstones. This pattern of changing seasons was reflected in the collection of the poll-tax for the Harranian treasury (to which we have already alluded) in the summer, autumn and winter months.

Certain festivals, all of them marked by lavish sacrifices, were celebrated at shrines outside Harran. One, on 28th Nisan (April), was the occasion of the sacrifice of a bull to Hermes and offerings to the 'Lord of Hours'. On 3rd Elul (September) Harranians bathed in secret in warm water, with tamarisk, wax, pine-cones, oil and sugar. The ceremony was completed before sunrise; they then made sacrifice and drank seven beakers of wine. On the 26th day

of this month was held the festival of the Conception (or, the Mountain?). Those who made vows attached a burning torch to a chicken; if the chicken was burnt before the torch, the vow, they believed, was accepted by the 'Lord of Luck'. At the beginning of Former Kanun (December) the women celebrated a festival to Venus and the water-nymphs, also outside Harran. The image of the goddess, 'hidden, far and near', was set up on a marble plinth in a tent, and the officiants brought fruit, flowers, herbs and animal victims.

Side by side with the lunisolar religious calendar which opened in the spring, the Harranians evidently observed a civil year beginning in Latter Kanun (January). On the last day of the previous month the chief priest, standing on a pulpit at the head of nine steps, struck each person with a branch of tamarisk—a familiar fertility rite. He then prayed for the long life, increase, power and eminence of the community; and he invoked the destruction of the buildings at Harran where once had stood the shrines of Venus—the Great Mosque, the Church of the Byzantines and the Women's Market.

### **The 'Mysteries' of Pagan Harran**

The central rites of pagan Harran, however, were the mysteries. They were celebrated principally to Shamal, lord of the *jinn*, perhaps the deity of the North to which Harranians turned in prayer and which they believed was the source of wisdom and might. It is possible that on the 27th day of every month, worshippers went out to the Kadi shrine to sacrifice to the moon, and on the following day they burned animals to Mars in a pavilion of baked bricks constructed in the form of a cone. Certainly mysteries took place on the 27th day of Haziran (June), Tammuz (July), Elul and Latter Kanun. Some mysteries had special features. In the Latter Kanun it was called the 'birthday of the Lord', who was, we are told, the Moon. The occasion was marked by the burning of pine-branches called Dadi—the name and ritual recall the *ded* ceremonies of Osiris worship in ancient Egypt, which had parallels in other regions of the ancient Near East. In Haziran the mystery was directed to the 'god who causes arrows to fly'. The priest shot into the air arrows bound to a burning torch cut from Harranian timber. He then crawled to retrieve the arrows; if the torch still burned the omen was good.

Extracts from the formulae at five Harranian mysteries have been preserved. Unhappily they are garbled; the translator from Syriac knew little Arabic—perhaps, too, he was reluctant to divulge the secret words. The words of two mysteries, the second and the fifth, are fairly complete, but only in the opening and closing phrases. At the second mystery—addressed to the devil and the idols—the priest exclaimed, 'Have I not given you what you handed to me?' The boy novice answered, 'For the dogs, the ravens and the ants!' 'What must we do,' asked the priest, 'concerning the dogs, the ravens and the ants?' 'O priest!' replied the boy, 'they are our brothers. The Lord is victorious and to him we celebrate the mysteries.' The mystery ended with the formula, 'Like the lambs in the flock, and the calves in the herd, and the youth among the men... who approach and enter the house of the Bughdariyyun, the house of the victorious one—we celebrate his mystery.' The fifth mystery opened with the exclamation of the priest, 'O son of the Bughdariyyun, hearken!' The novices replied, 'We are content.' 'Be silent' called the priest, and the others answered, 'We hear.' The priest then declared 'Ho! I say what I know, and naught do I omit.' The mystery ended with a formula like that at the end of all the mysteries, 'Those who depart to the house of the Bughdariyyun. Our Lord is victorious, and to him we celebrate his mystery.'

The ceremony apparently lasted seven days. During that time the priest proclaimed 22 words with trilling and cantillation. The novices were not to be seen by any woman. They ate and drank. Before proclaiming the words they smeared their eyes with the drink, they received bread and salt and partook of consecrated bread and chicken. The drink was stored in a corner. The novices said to the priest, 'Our master, let the strange thing be declared.' [217] He replied, 'Let the bowls be filled with mystery; let what remains be collected (?).'

### [Figures 7 and 8](#)

We cannot, of course, expect to reconstruct these mysteries; no Sabian, one author tells us, would reveal these secrets even if he had abandoned his religion. But light is thrown on them by the Sumatar inscriptions which I have quoted. It is reasonable to equate Budar of Sumatar with the Bughdariyyun of Harran—whatever the name means. The office of Budar seems to have been transmitted from one dignitary to another. In Shebat 165 Tiridates, the ruler (of the Arabs?), had chosen his successor at Sumatar; perhaps 'nourish' in the Sumatar text implies a ritual of feeding, as with the novices at Harran. The symbol of the Budar was evidently a stool, and indeed the chiefs of the Harranians in the 7th century were said to occupy a stool. It was evidently handed down from Budar to Budar; if the



chain of transmission was broken, the pillar which rested on the stool would fall. The Sumatar text shows that we may perhaps identify Shamal of Harran with Marilaha of Sumatar.

Much has been written on human sacrifice among the Harranians. On 8th Ab (August), at the pressing of new wine in honour of the gods, they are said to have sacrificed a newly-born male child, and to have employed the flesh with the addition of flour, saffron, spikenard, cloves and oil, as the food at the mysteries. (One writer, however, declares that this sacrifice was performed whenever the earth was five degrees in the ascendant or the reverse.) The allegation must be rejected, at any rate for the Moslem period. Al-Dimashqi in the 14th century goes so far as to declare that human sacrifice appeared in Sabian rites directed to every planet—except, significantly enough, to Saturn to whom a bull was offered. To Jupiter, he maintains, was sacrificed an infant born of a bought (in Arabic Jupiter is the 'buyer') woman, the infant's mother to the sun, to Mars a redhaired man, to Venus a whitehaired woman, to Mercury a cultured youth, to the moon a fair man. This cannot be taken seriously. Al-Dimashqi's taste for the horrific is shown by his story that the idol of Mars held a bloody head in one hand; from an earlier writer we learn that it was a burning torch, not a human head!

There are three accounts of a severed human head which uttered oracles in the Harranian temples, one account in each of the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries. But in one important detail the accounts vary. One maintains that the head was dedicated to Mercury, another to Mars, while the third states that the ceremony took place in the temple of the Moon. Al-Biruni declares that the Sabians sacrificed children to Saturn. Elsewhere he writes that the Sabians were notorious for human sacrifice, but 'at present they are not allowed to carry it out in public'. We may wonder whether it was ever performed during the Christian era. With one dubious exception, no Christian chronicler indicts the Harranian pagans with this offence. An explanation for the naive reports of Moslem writers may be found in the Syriac history of Bar Hebraeus, which was compiled from earlier sources. Ibrahim, governor of Harran in the 9th century, permitted the Harranians to celebrate their mysteries in public. They led in procession, our chronicler relates with distaste, a bull decorated with garlands of flowers and bells, and accompanied by singers and musicians; it was then solemnly sacrificed. This bull is evidently the sacrificial victim to Saturn of al-Dimashqi. We read of it elsewhere. It was wholly black—an unusual colour in Harranian sacrifices. It was fed with grass plucked by virgins at sunrise. Drawn by a chain of gold, with incense burning before it and amid prayers, it was taken to the place of sacrifice. Its head was smeared with salt and wine, it was decapitated and its organs were examined for omens. We may find here the origin of the stories of the human victim placed in a bath of sesame oil and fed with figs for the period of one year; then, rumour had it, the severed head would advise the Sabians for one year—others held one week—on their scientific and economic affairs. The stories derive from a popular Harranian proverb—'he is in oil', that is, he is in distress. Not unrelated is the phrase 'preparation of the head', a well-known term among alchemists.

That there was hocus pocus in the ritual of Harran is implied by descriptions of the ordeals to which young male neophytes were subjected. We read of four vaults below a temple where stood idols in the shape of the heavenly bodies. The eyes of the [218] lads were bandaged. As they sat wearing slippers made of the skin of sacrificial victims and crowned with garlands of willow, they heard frightening noises from copper instruments, and lights flashed in the darkness. Their eyes were uncovered, and they swooned. The historian Mas'udi will have none of this. The fearful words and sounds did not, he reveals, proceed from the idols, but from temple priests plying bellows behind the walls. These are the mysteries described by a Sabian poet: '. . . The strange things; a temple set upon vaults. In it they honour the stars, and in it are their idols and vows to the absent ones . . .'

## **Manners and Fashions**

We know something of social customs at Harran. They did not perform circumcision. They took care to avoid persons afflicted with leprosy or other contagious diseases. After pollution of any sort they washed with natron. They considered procreation as the sole purpose of marriage. Nevertheless, they did not practise polygamy. The marriage ceremony was performed before witnesses; marriage between close relations was forbidden. Divorce was granted only after clear evidence had been shown of shameful behaviour, and a divorced woman could not be remarried to her previous husband.

At pagan Harran women enjoyed equality under the law. The high status of women is evident from the monuments of early Edessa. Some tomb inscriptions commemorate women. Shalmath, queen of Edessa, was honoured by a statue on one of the Corinthian columns still standing on the Citadel mount at Urfa; the statue has gone, the Syriac inscription remains to this day [[plate 3](#)] [[plate 6](#)]. The only two effigies in stone found at Urfa are of women.

Women appear prominently in the mosaics of Edessa. Their necklaces and gold brooches and, most of all, their placid features, indicate the dignity of their position. We can trace the change of fashion in female headwear. In the 'Family Portrait' Mosaic (as in another mosaic now destroyed) a young girl wears three combs in her hair [plate 7]. But her aunt and grandmother wear high hats with two bands of cloth (?); and so, too, does a lady in the 'Funerary Couch' Mosaic [plate 8]. In the less wealthy family of the 'Tripod' Mosaic the woman's hat is lower [plate 4]. A different hat is found in the sculptured bust of a certain Shalmath; this type of hat resembles the headgear worn by Kurdish women of Urfa at the present day [figures 7 and 8].

The Harranians ate meat only if the animals had been slaughtered in accordance with ritual regulations, by severing the jugular vein and the gullet. The method resembled that of Islam, and there was much argument by Moslem theologians as to whether it was permissible to eat meat prepared by Sabians. More species of animals were forbidden to the Harranians than to Moslems. Not only were dogs and pigs prohibited, but also camels; Sabians believed that ill luck would follow if they passed under the nose-rein of a camel. They would not eat fish, pigeons and chickens. It is related of the famous Sabian secretary Ibrahim ibn Hilal that he declined to eat these foods when he was entertained at the house of the Vizier. 'Do not let the food grow cold', urged the Vizier. 'Eat some of these beans with us.' 'O Vizier', replied the Sabian, 'I shall not disobey God in my food.' For garlic and broad beans, too, were forbidden to Sabians; some refused to eat also kidney beans, cauliflower, cabbage and lentils. The rules are said to have derived from medical considerations.

The Harranians seem to have had high regard for wine. The pressing of new wine was an annual occasion for religious festivity. Wine appeared among the offerings to the dead at the festival of the autumn full moon, and the 'Funerary Couch' Mosaic depicts the dead man holding a bowl of wine [plate 8]. Wine was poured over animal victims at the time of sacrifice. Nevertheless, abstemiousness in intoxicating drink was held by the Sabians to be a virtue. Indeed, the Sabian Ibrahim ibn Hilal indited verses in honour of wine—but he owed his first advancement to his sobriety. He was at a drinking party with the Vizier and his friends when a messenger arrived for the Caliph demanding the immediate despatch of a letter to a provincial governor. Ibrahim alone had a cool enough head to compose a suitable document—to the admiration of his companions.

Amulets were widely used in Harranian ritual. The left wing of chickens, stripped of the flesh, was worn by boys and pregnant women. Rings engraved with the shapes of animals were highly esteemed. One of our authors asked why. '(The Harranians) maintain', he writes, 'that they came across them in the tombs of their dead long ago, and that they would win the blessing of God through them.' This may refer to rings worn by the dead, but perhaps it refers rather to pictures of animals in the tombs. Some animals are depicted in the 'Orpheus' Mosaic. In another Edessa mosaic which I have entitled the 'Animal' Mosaic the central section has been largely destroyed, but in the borders animals are represented with lively art. We may imagine the Harranians engraving pictures upon their rings to acquire the *baraka* transmitted from the dead.

The Sabians suffered certain disabilities in their relations with their Moslem neighbours. Some Moslem theologians forbade Moslems to intermarry with Sabians and to share their meals; others permitted it. The separateness of the Sabians was accentuated by their regulations on prayer and festivals and their restrictions on food. In consequence, loyalty to the Sabian community made exacting demands on its members. Nevertheless, those Sabians who achieved distinction in the world of science and letters maintained, their links with their fellow-sectarians.

### **Culture and Science; the Sabian Achievement**

It was particularly in the fields of astronomy, medicine and the exact sciences that Sabians won renown. The Syriac-speaking communities, both Christian and pagan, received and transmitted the learning of Greece and Babylonia to the Islamic world and thence to Europe. But the proper observance of Sabian ritual in all its minutiae required an exact acquaintance with natural phenomena that was not required for the practice of Christianity. The association of certain metals with individual planets that was current among the Sabians has its counterpart in the Greek treatises. Knowledge of the relative distance of the planets from the earth was derived by the Sabians from Greece; and from this they allotted each day of the week to a planet, in the order of Saturn, the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter and Venus. The Sabians, then, made their own distinctive contribution to contemporary science, and the extent of their contribution may be recognized in any general analysis of Islamic civilization.



The first Sabian to achieve an outstanding reputation was Thabit ibn Qurrah, born, probably at Harran, in about 836—that is, six years after the visit of al-Ma'mun to Harran. On returning from his studies at Baghdad, Thabit came into conflict with the Sabian authorities at Harran. We are told that he was forbidden access to their temples. Subsequently he recanted, but afterwards his relations with the community again became so strained that he withdrew altogether from Harran. He was later appointed an astronomer to the Caliph at Baghdad, and there he spent most of his life. He was, we are told, on such intimate terms with the Caliph al-Mu'tadid that he alone had the right to sit in the royal presence; even the Vizier stood. Thabit was a prolific translator and writer, and his treatises—which range from metaphysics, history, music and astrology to medicine, mathematics and astronomy—had great influence on contemporary thought. He established a Sabian community at Baghdad and directed its affairs. Thabit's treatise on the doctrines and rites of the Sabians has apparently not survived.

Thabit died in 901. He had established a family tradition of culture which extended over two centuries. His son Sinan, in particular, was physician to the Caliph and founded several hospitals. Sinan's attainments were not confined to medicine; he was also astronomer, philosopher and historian, and he was celebrated as a man of great humanity and tolerance. He adopted Islam, much against his will, but his children remained Sabians. They, too, achieved fame in the same fields of learning. Another famous Sabian family was descended from a Harranian physician who had settled at nearby Raqqah. His two sons were well-known doctors at Baghdad. His grandson was the celebrated Ibrahim ibn Hilal, to whom we have already alluded, Court secretary in the 10th century and a man of many parts—poet, prose-writer, historian, mathematician and astronomer. He was a devout and loyal Sabian, and he won toleration for Sabian [219] communities throughout the Empire. Indeed, he refused the post of Vizier rather than desert his faith, and he would not leave Baghdad for fear that his community might suffer in his absence. He typified the Sabian virtues of self-restraint, service, modesty and tolerance; he knew the Koran well and would fast during Ramadan. His son and grandson were well-known writers. The latter also attained high rank as Secretary, but he seems to have become a Moslem.

The Sabian Muhammad ibn Jabir al-Battani, who died in 929, was one of the greatest astronomers and mathematicians of all time. He lived at Raqqah. His astronomical tables and his works on the precession of the equinoxes, on the orbits of the planets and on eclipses were highly esteemed in Europe as well as in the East—as, indeed, they are to the, present day.

This efflorescence of Sabian culture and science at Baghdad and other centres of the Moslem Empire—there were other Sabian astronomers, mathematicians, physicians and writers who cannot be mentioned here—had unfortunate consequences for Harran. Its most distinguished sons left it. It declined rapidly. An aura of mystery, it is true, clung to the place. Men told of fossilized skeletons in the nearby mountains. At Byzantium a pleasant story is related of a lady healed of childlessness by a stone believed—falsely—to come from Jacob's well at Harran. From Persia we hear of a Christian deacon educated at Harran, who had learnt there to do service to the devil. He recanted, refused to sacrifice two chickens to his master, and was—his pupils believed—flung to his death. The renown of the alchemists of Harran was known at Court. A certain monk of Harran received rapid promotion to a Bishopric and even to the Patriarchate on the Caliph's personal intervention. But his undertaking to justify this promotion by transmuting base metals into gold was not honoured, and he did not survive long.

Harran's condition worsened. It was a victim of the internecine feuds of petty warlords between the 10th and 12th centuries. In the 11th century the Sabian temple, which had replaced the temple destroyed to make place for a mosque at the beginning of the Moslem occupation, was itself destroyed; but some of the fine buildings erected on the site of Sabian shrines were still to be seen by the Spanish traveller Ibn Jubayr at the end of the 12th century.

'(It) has markets that are admirably disposed and wonderfully arranged. They are all roofed with wood, and men within them are never out of the long shade. You pass through them as you would pass through a house with large corridors . . . The venerated cathedral mosque, which is old but has been restored, is of surpassing beauty . . . We have never seen a mosque with wider arches . . . In the beauty of construction of this mosque and in the fine arrangements of the adjoining markets, we observed a splendid spectacle; and the harmony of design is such as is rarely found in cities. . . . Harran . . . is a considerable town, with strong and formidable walls . . . It has a strong fortress on its eastern side; . . . the walls of the fortress itself are strongly fortified.'

A century later we have a brief description of the gates and the wide streets of Harran. In one tower were deposited copper *jinn* which were regarded as a talisman against snakes; the Sabian Thabit ibn Qurrah had written a treatise on

statuettes as a prophylactic against snakes. The citadel of Harran still stood on the site of a round Sabian temple. But a few years afterwards this last remnant of Sabian worship was razed by the Mongols. The Sabians had disappeared from Harran.

Today Harran retains vestiges of its variegated past—thanks to the labours of archaeologists, notably D. Storm Rice. The imposing ruins of the Great Mosque dominate the countryside, and fine carvings in the walls of the Citadel belong to the Islamic period. Stone lions of 'Hittite' workmanship recall the earliest history of the city [[figures 9 and 10](#)]. So, too, the well still today called the 'well of Jacob's woman' outside Harran may be identified with the well from which Jacob drew water for the flock of Laban (Gen. 29:10). Between these two widely separated periods of Harranian history the sparse relics of the Sabians serve as a link. The ruins of the Citadel, where stood the last Sabian temple, survive. In the Great Mosque a chapel has been excavated that may once have been a Sabian shrine. The legend of the local Moslem saint, Hayyat al-Harrani who is said to have had connection with India, reminds us of the Sabian associations with India. Even the peculiar shape of the beehive hovels of the modern village of Harran recalls the cult house of baked bricks shaped like a cone to which the Sabians went out to sacrifice to the planet Mars [[plate 19](#)].

### **Mandaeans—the Sabians of Today?**

The Sabians survive, it has been maintained, to the present day, not at Harran but, for the most part, in the marshes at the lower reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates. Here live the Subba, or Mandaeans (perhaps the Syriac term for 'Gnostics'). Their earlier title was Nazarene, and travellers have wrongly called them the 'Christians of St John'. The members of this strange sect—mainly boat-builders and craftsmen in silver and gold—number today no more than a few thousand. Like other isolated minorities in this region of overriding nationalism, they are a rapidly declining community.

The Mandaeans believe that the upper world is represented by the Great King of Light, the Great Life. Inferior to him are countless spiritual beings, some beneficent, others demoniac. The earth was created out of black waters; the Zodiac and the seven planets are the work of evil spirits. The 'Knowledge of Life' and the light-giving powers seek to direct men and women to good actions; the planets and the spirit of physical life incite them to error through Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other 'false religions'. The teacher of the Mandaeans was John the Baptist [220], himself baptized, while yet a boy, by the 'Knowledge of Life'. Those who lead a good life pass after death to a world of light, others undergo torture, but even the most evil will be purified in a great baptism at the end of the world.

Baptism in flowing water—which the Mandaeans call *yardna*, perhaps connected with the name Jordan—is the most important and characteristic sacrament of the Mandaeans, and from this they derive their name Subba. Simple baptism is performed before all religious ceremonies and daily before sunrise; a state of ritual uncleanness must be removed by triple immersion [[plate 20](#)]. Priests carry out more complex rites of baptism. A second form of sacrament is the sacred meal of fish, pomegranate, coconuts, and other fruits and nuts. Most religious occasions are marked also by the drinking of consecrated water and the eating of consecrated bread and of *sa* (dough in the shape of a phallus). The burning of incense and the sacrifice of sheep and pigeons are other familiar accompaniments of religious ceremonial, although Mandaeans are reluctant to slay animals. The Mandaeans construct their cult hut (*mandi*) of reeds and mud beside running water. An oblong flat-roofed hut (*andiruna*) is used for weddings and the consecration of priests.

The rites of baptism and the sacred meal are performed at decisive turning-points in the life of the observant Mandaean—at birth, marriage and death. The last is the most momentous, since Mandaean belief in the after-life leads to the punctilious observance of minutiae of ritual at the death bed and funeral. Formal ceremonial is conducted by priests, bearing their insignia of turban and fillet, myrtle wreath, staff, gold signet ring and, on certain occasions, an iron ring carrying the picture of certain animals (as among the Sabians)—lion, scorpion, bee and snake. As among the Sabians, the induction of a new priest lasts seven days; on each day he is instructed in three secret words. At Sabian mysteries 22 words were solemnly uttered.

Mandaeans, like the Sabians, hold that each day and hour of the week is under the influence of a planet. They will not willingly commence an important enterprise unless the omens are favourable. Their year consists of twelve months of thirty days each, followed by five inauspicious days of *epact*. At the New Year they keep vigil at home for 36 hours, for it is believed that the spirits of light depart from the world to congratulate the Supreme Being at

this commemoration of Creation. The New Year is marked by the rebuilding of the cult hut, by the preparation of food, and by baptism. Among formulae uttered by communicants is the phrase, similar to that of the Harranian mysteries, 'Ask and find, speak and listen'. But the Harranians worshipped the planets; the Mandaean invocations include a formal denial of the power of the sun and the moon.

As among the Sabians, Mandaean women may own and inherit property. Divorce is not recognized; the married woman is not expected to remarry—but may in fact do so. A man may have as many wives as he desires. Any plant that produces seed may be eaten by Mandaeans, and vegetables may be eaten freely, provided they are first washed. Animals must be killed by methods of ritual slaughter, but birds of prey, fish-eating birds, fish without scales, camels, horses, pigs, dogs, rabbits, horses and cats are forbidden food.

Are the Mandaeans lineal descendants of the pagans of Harran? Or are they the true Sabians, whose name the Harranians had usurped? According to their own tradition, the Mandaeans originated in Palestine, and went into exile first to Harran, then to Mesopotamia. But Mandaean history lies on the borderland of legend, and although some Mandaean stories go back to the beginnings of Islam or even earlier, their compilation was much later. True, the Mandaean language is akin to the Syriac of Harran. We have seen, too, isolated points of resemblance between Mandaean and Sabian ceremonial—in the formulae of mysteries, the ceremonies at the induction of priests, the use of rings engraved with the pictures of animals. Yet the resemblance may be accidental. The cult of Harran was based upon worship of the planets; in the early Mandaean books the planets are regarded as malevolent. Mandaean religion contains much that is Iranian in origin; there is little trace of Iranian influence at Harran. Mandaeans use a solar calendar; the calendar of Harran was lunisolar. Most important, baptism is the central sacrament among the Mandaeans; it had a minor part at Harran—and it could never have been of importance there, since Harran suffered always from a shortage of water.

We can only speculate on the origin of the Mandaeans and the identity of the Sabians. *Allah a'lam*, the mediaeval historian would say, 'Allah knows best.'

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## Figures and Plates



**The pagans of Edessa** believed in a future life. Rock-cut tombs in the hills outside the city testify to this, with sculptured reliefs in a style that is familiar from the better-known sculptures of Palmyra, nearly three hundred miles to the south. The winged figure above is a detail from one of these tombs. The reclining figure below, set in a semi-circular niche, recalls the personage in the mosaic of Pl. 8. With their belief in a day of judgement the Sabians were listed in the Koran as members of a tolerated religion. The writing here, as in the mosaics, is Syriac. (9, 11)

**Through the Harran Gate of Edessa** (below), its citizens related, the emissary of King Abgar returned bearing the letter from Jesus and a portrait of Jesus on a kerchief. The adoption of Christianity at Edessa was in fact two centuries after the Crucifixion. The Sabian rites of moon-worship continued, however, at Edessa and in the nearby hills, until well into the Islamic period. Remains of the Byzantine wall can be seen on the right. (10)





**The first kingdom** to adopt Christianity as the state religion was Edessa (modern Urfa), some 50 kilometres north of Harran. Side by side with the new religion, however, the pagan rites persisted. The first Christian king of Edessa was probably Abgar the Great; on the steep-sided Citadel Mount, in the southern part of the town, stand two 60-foot Corinthian columns (below), one of which once bore a statue of Abgar's Queen, Shalmath. The statue has disappeared, but an inscription still bears witness to the high status of women in Edessa. (3)





**In a remote watering-place**

called Sumatar Harabesi in the Tektek hills, east of Edessa, are ruined buildings, reliefs and inscriptions which shed some light on the Sabians in the 2nd century AD. In their long frock coats, with their hair dressed in ringlets—as Harun al-Rashid's son was to see them 600 years later—they practised their secret rites to Sin, the moon-god, and to Marilaha, 'the Lord God' possibly one and the same supreme deity.



**Every planet had a temple** of special shape and colour in the Sabian ritual. Some of the Sumatar shrines also appear to have been cylindrical, some rectangular. The one shown above is circular on a square base; the outer perimeter of the circular wall just touches the outer edge of each side of the square base—a feat of some architectural skill. (12)



**A headless stone statue** near one of the ruined shrines of Sumatar (above) wears a long frock coat, beneath which trouser legs appear. On the central mount is a standing figure (below, left) wearing a shorter version of the coat. Close by it is a bust in a niche (below). The dedicatory inscriptions are in Syriac: one invokes 'Sin the deity', with a date corresponding to AD 165. (13-15)



applying it to a censer on a tripod foot. The woman at the left has what is perhaps a flower—this may have been a cult-symbol of the Sabians. The family in this mosaic must have been pagans, for there is no Christian formula in the Syriac inscription. That the Sabians believed in a future life is suggested by the words at the foot of the mosaic, 'May he have a goodly latter end.' (4)

**'Shining and succulent'**, as they are described by the pilgrim abbeß 'Aetheria of Aquitania', who saw them in the 5th or 6th century AD, the sacred carp in the fishponds of Edessa are evidence of the worship of Atargatis, or Venus. To this day they are never eaten; traditionally inviolate, they even leap out of the water to snatch pieces of bread. (5)

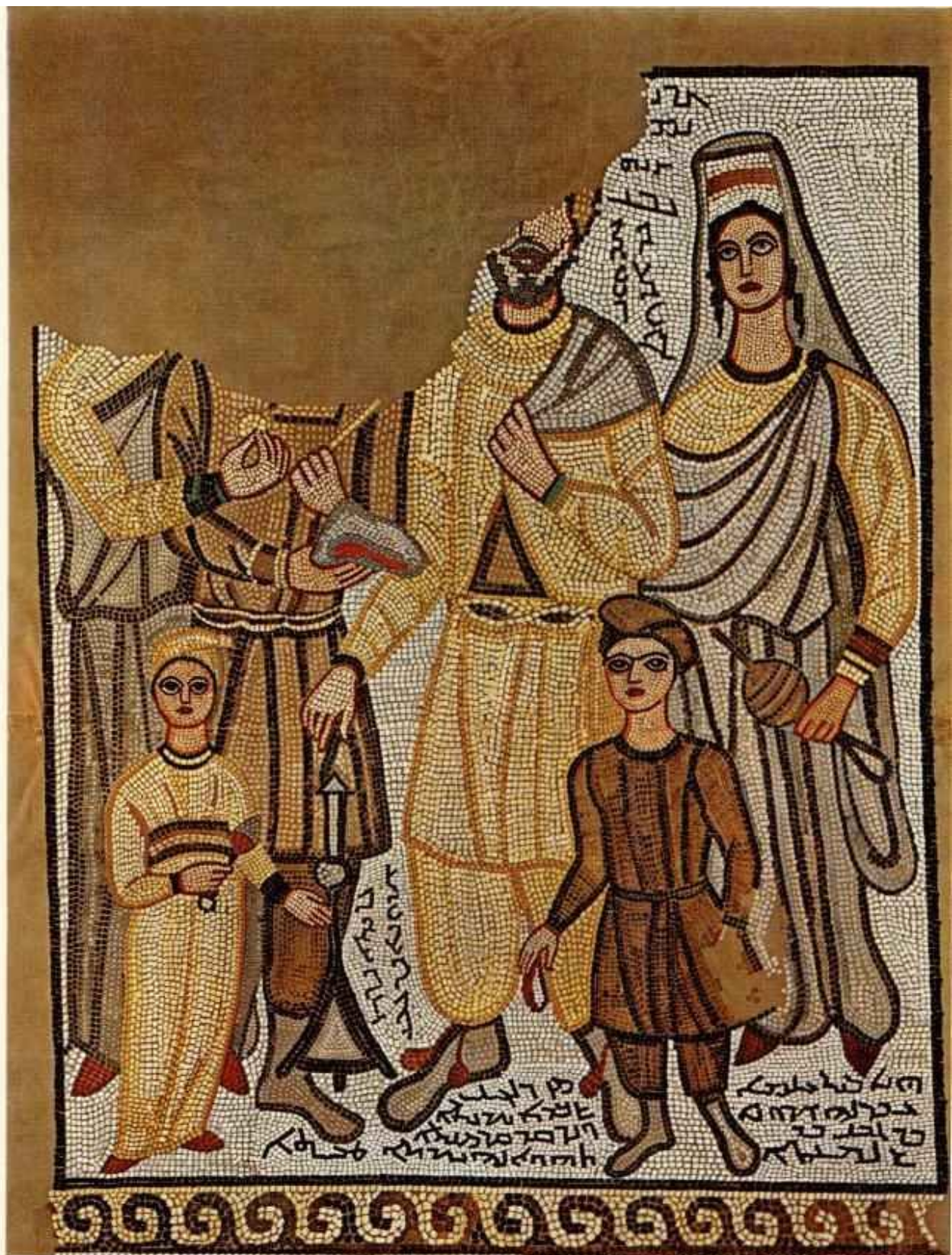






THE FAMILY PORTRAIT MOSAIC, with names in Syriac; probably second or early third century A.D.

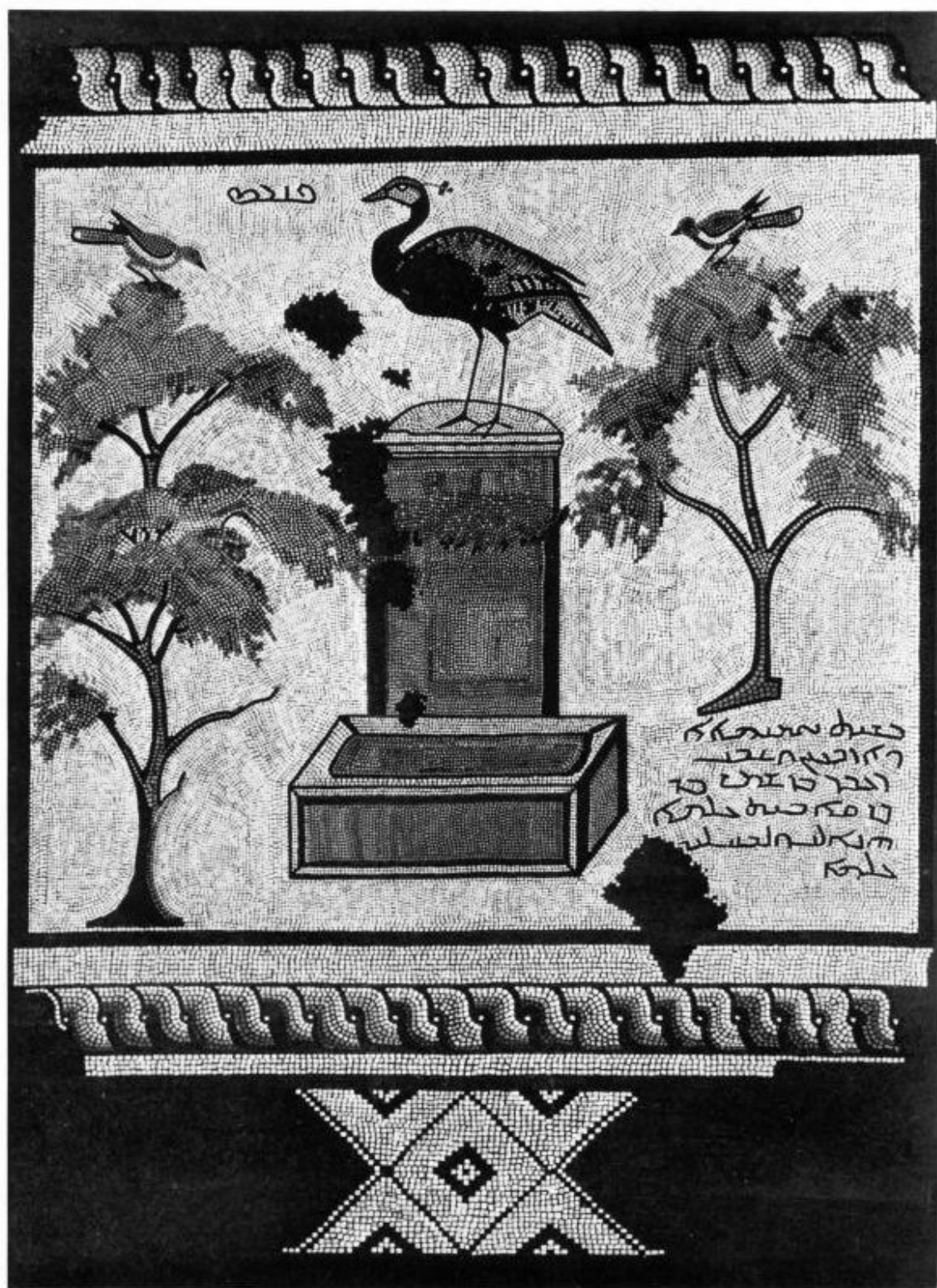




THE TRIPOD MOSAIC, with Syriac inscriptions including an epitaph (p. 34); probably second or third century A.D.

**The everyday life** of the people of Edessa in the 3rd century is shown in the funerary mosaics that have been discovered in rock tombs in and around the city. The 'Tripod' Mosaic (top right) shows a family, probably of modest means, dressed in Parthian style. The central figure holds a leaf, probably aromatic, in his hand and is applying it to a censer on a tripod foot. The woman at the left has what is perhaps a flower—this may have been a cult-symbol of the Sabians. The family in this mosaic must have been pagans, for there is no Christian formula in the Syriac inscription. That the Sabians believed in a future life is suggested by the words at the foot of the mosaic, 'May he have a goodly latter end.' (4)



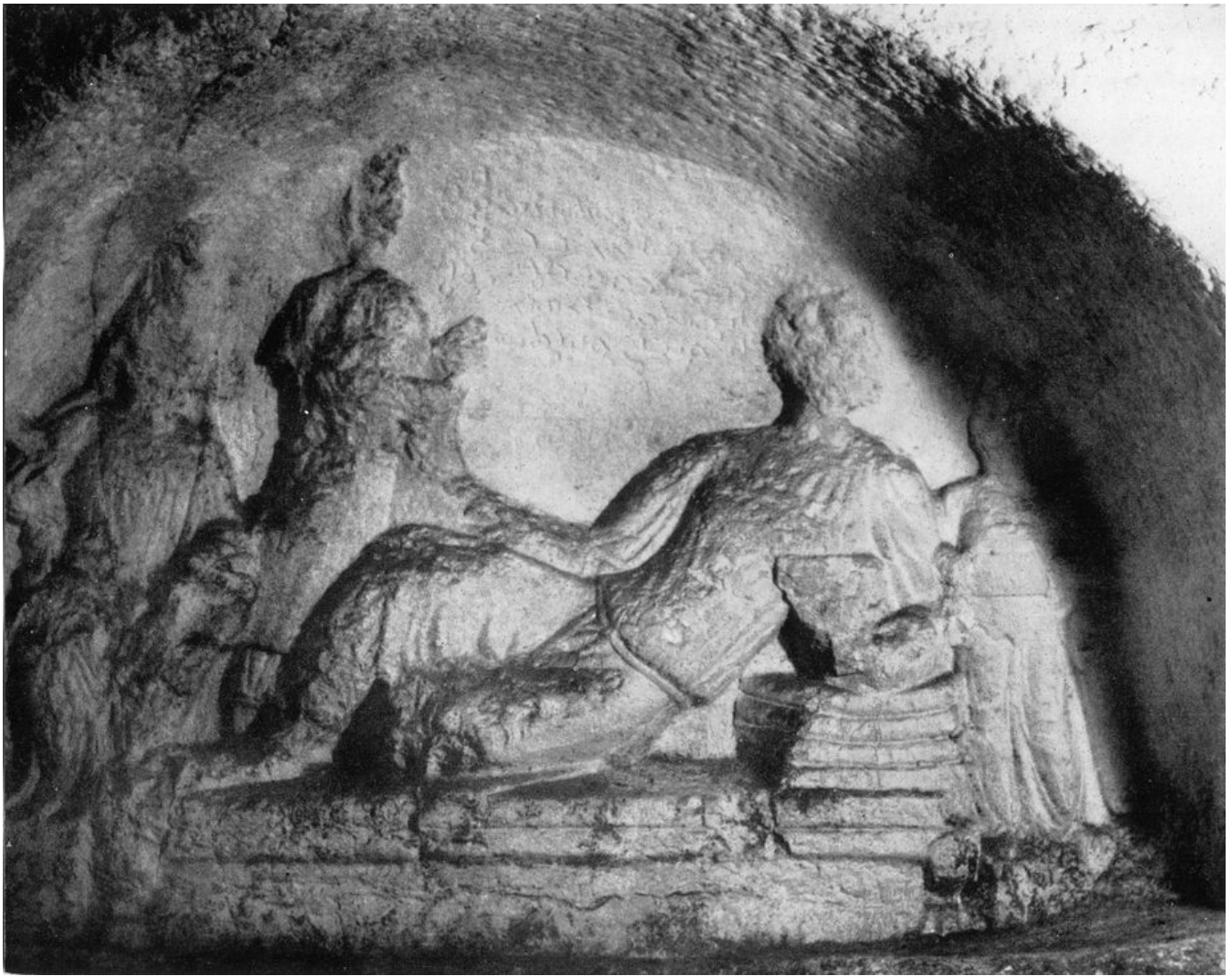


THE PHOENIX MOSAIC, with Syriac inscriptions; dated A.D. 235-6

**Re-birth is the theme** of the 'Phoenix' Mosaic (above), from the floor of a cave tomb at Edessa. The phoenix (its name is inscribed in Syriac at the top of the picture) stands on a wreathed pillar, symbolic of the soul; before it is a conventional stone tomb. The theme is thus clearly stated, with symbols of death, the soul, and rebirth. This mosaic (dated AD 235-6), and the one opposite, were only found in the last few years, and are here reproduced in colour for the first time. (17)



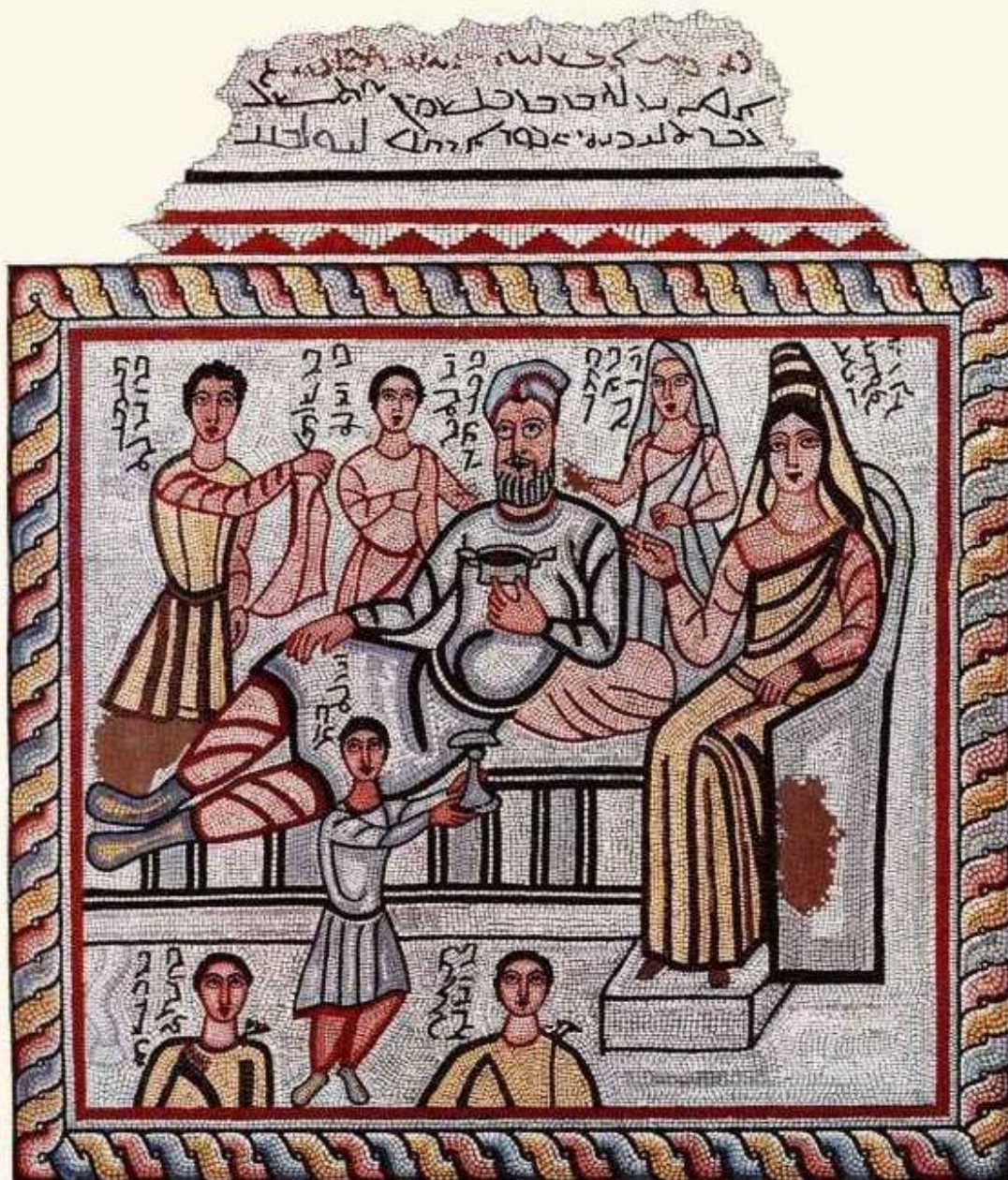
**The pagans of Edessa** believed in a future life. Rock-cut tombs in the hills outside the city testify to this, with sculptured reliefs in a style that is familiar from the better-known sculptures of Palmyra, nearly three hundred miles to the south. The winged figure above is a detail from one of these tombs. The reclining figure below, set in a semi-circular niche, recalls the personage in the mosaic of Pl. 8. With their belief in a day of judgement the Sabians were listed in the Koran as members of a tolerated religion. The writing here, as in the mosaics, is Syriac. (9, 11)



*Relief from Palmyra (the Hypogeum of Atenatan, AD 229). The reclining male figure, and the female figures grouped in the background, strikingly resemble the 'Funerary Couch' Mosaic at Edessa. (5)*







THE FUNERARY COUCH MOSAIC, with Syriac inscriptions; dated A.D. 278.



**Wealth and sophistication** are shown by some of the mosaics of Edessa. In the 'Family Portrait' Mosaic (above) Moqimu poses with his wife on his left, his three sons, his daughter and, behind him, his grand-daughter Shalmath. His wife and daughter wear tall head-dresses with bands of contrasting colours, grander than the one in Pl. 4. The girl in the background, too young for the head-dress, decorates her hair with three curved combs.

In the 'Funerary Couch' Mosaic (right) the central figure reclines on a couch, a stoup of wine in his left hand. His wife, in elegant robes and a high head-dress, sits on his left, and their children, younger than those in the 'Family Portrait' Mosaic, are disposed around them. This mosaic was made in AD 277-8, the 'Family Portrait' is undated but may be earlier. (7, 8)



THE ORPHEUS MOSAIC, with Syriac inscriptions; dated A.D. 228

**Orpheus with his lute** is the theme of a mosaic from the floor of another Sabian cave at Edessa (right), dated AD 227–8. Here Orpheus, seated on a mound, plays to a docile group of birds and animals. It is strange to find this myth pictured so far from Greece, but the theme was a popular one in Rome's eastern provinces, and throughout their early history the Edessans loved dancing, song and poetry. The Emperor Alexander Severus is said to have worshipped Orpheus; he passed by Edessa in AD 231. (18)



*David with his harp, from a wall painting at Dura Europos. This may represent another variation of the Orpheus myth. (6)*



one invokes 'Sin the deity', with a date corresponding to AD 165. (13-15)



**The moon temple,** Deir al-Kadi, may have been at Sanimagara, where these ruins, with their florid decorations, now stand. At such sites perhaps were celebrated—mainly in honour of Shamal, lord of the *jinn*—the central rites of Harran, the 'mysteries'. (16)





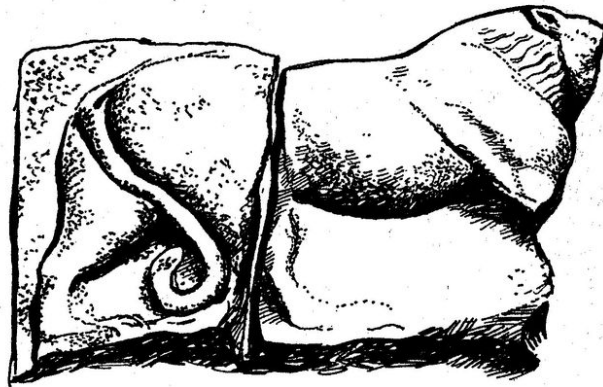
*The high, draped head-dress of the women of Harran is shown in this bust of a certain Shalmath (left). An English missionary recorded a similar female head-dress (right) when he visited Harran a century ago. (7, 8)*



**Women are prominent** in the monuments of pagan Edessa, where they evidently enjoyed respect under the law and an honoured position in the family. The only stone effigies found at Edessa are of women; the one pictured above shows the high, draped head-dress, reminiscent of those worn by European women in mediaeval times. (6)



*In the ruins of the Citadel of Harran fine carvings of the Islamic period can still be seen, such as this relief of two dogs on leashes. (9)*



*Carved stone lion of Hittite workmanship from the ruins of the Harran citadel. This and similar reliefs are reminders of the earliest period in the city's history. (10)*



**Harran today** still retains vestiges of its variegated past. A village of about a hundred beehive-shaped huts (above) occupies the south-eastern part of the old city, overlooked by the ruins of the Great Mosque and the Citadel, where stood the last Sabian temple in Harran. In the first millennium of our era the Sabians

resisted the overtures of both Christianity and Islam, but in the face of persecution clung steadfast to the basic tenets and ritual of their strange planetary religion. In the 12th or 13th century the last remaining centre of their worship was destroyed by the Mongols, and the Sabians disappeared from Harran. (19)





**The Sabians survive,** it has been maintained, to this day in a small sect, mainly metal-workers and boat-builders, in the lower reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates. These people, known as Mandaeans or Subba, were wrongly identified by travellers as followers of John the Baptist, though baptism in running water is the most important of their sacraments. A priest of this sect is shown (left) performing the rite of baptism, which includes complete immersion and giving of water to drink from the flowing stream.

There are similarities with the little that is known of Sabian ritual and beliefs—for instance in the induction of priests and in the mystery rites—and the Mandaean language is akin to Syriac. But there are also radical differences: the Mandaeans, like the Sabians, hold that human fate and actions are subject to the influence of the planets, but, unlike the Sabians, they believe that this influence is entirely evil. Their own traditions place their origin in Palestine, with a period of exile at Harran, but here history lies on the borderland of legend. (20)



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